

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 274

SP 014 213

AUTHOR Yarger, Sam J.
TITLE Some Uncomfortable Assertions about Collaboration.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, California, April 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Programs; Educational Policy; Federal Programs; *Formative Evaluation; *Governance; Governing Boards; *Inservice Teacher Education; Program Design; Program Improvement; *Teacher Centers

ABSTRACT

The concept of collaboration, which underlies the design and structure of the Teacher Center Policy Board, has been widely accepted as an effective mechanism, but this acceptance is to a large degree without sound basis. A number of assertions can be supported about the ineffectiveness of collaboration: (1) collaboration in teacher education is becoming an end unto itself and is not a means for improving programs; (2) collaborative structures in teacher education tend to disrupt existing governance mechanisms, thus either impeding or isolating program development; (3) collaboration is often not related to quality or improvement in program development; (4) collaboration operates against competent program developers functioning freely and exhibiting sensitivity to their clients; and (5) unless collaborative governance structures operate as support systems for competent program developers, the process will lower rather than raise the quality of programs. (DS)

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ED170274

SOME UNCOMFORTABLE ASSERTIONS
ABOUT COLLABORATION

Sam J. Yarger
Syracuse University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
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A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting
of the American Educational Research Association

San Francisco, California
April, 1979

INTRODUCTION

In 1977, Congress enacted PL94-482, thus creating federally funded Teacher Centers. For many, it was the culmination of a long, involved process, and heralded a great new world of staff development--a world in which teachers would finally assume control over their own professional growth. To others, the passage of this law demonstrated once again that the federal government is capable of making major mistakes--attempting to restructure the world of inservice education without due regard for all involved can probably never work. To still others, it was simply another federal program--well intentioned, perhaps even offering a good opportunity to improve on what has historically occurred in inservice education, but realistically providing the financial resources that would have to be carefully stretched to buy even a good lunch for each of the nation's teachers.

Certainly none of the above perceptions is totally accurate. Rather, Teacher Centers represents an honest attempt to promote the development of inservice programs for teachers that are more responsive to teacher-perceived needs than programs have been in the past. More important to an understanding of Teacher Centers is the fact that PL94-482 is also the product of a politically oriented legislative and bureaucratic process. In fact, many "Washington watchers" have been amazed at the intensity of this process with regard to Teacher Centers, given the relative insignificance of the monies available to support the program. Consider for a moment the different mix of education groups that viewed Teacher Centers as important enough to attempt to influence the final form of the regulations--

- Two teacher organizations involved in an internecine battle, both desiring to demonstrate the power of their influence.
- A variety of school administrator groups viewing Teacher Centers as a direct challenge to their legitimate authority.
- Many state level educational groups and organizations promoting the notion that all aspects of education should be coordinated and established at the state level.
- And finally, college and university groups and organizations viewing Teacher Centers as offering a real and significant challenge to their very existence.

All of these groups exhibited intense interest and attempted to place pressure on those who shaped the law, and those who developed the regulations that are meant to operationalize the law. Legislators were contacted, hearings were attended, good old fashioned lobbying occurred, leaving those poor souls attempting to establish a new federal program with the unenviable task of keeping every group reasonably satisfied. In reality, it was a battle. There were no winners. The result was a federal program structure that would have made Rube Goldberg glow with pride and satisfaction.

THE POLICY BOARD

The posturing of various groups and organizations and the numerous interpretations or misinterpretations of the regulations have probably created conflicting and potentially damaging perceptions. While the regulations clearly require a Policy Board with a majority of practicing classroom teachers, these very same regulations also establish evalua-

tion criteria that not only require the active involvement of school administrators, but also give them legitimate power and authority in program development. For example, the development of inservice programs designed to address the established needs of children in school and to be integrated with a school district's ongoing staff development program clearly fall within the purview of the school authorities. Thus, it appears that while the Teacher Center regulations do provide unprecedented decision making rights to teachers, they do not, and apparently were not intended to establish teachers as the sole constituent group for the operation of Teacher Centers.

It would appear that federally sponsored Teacher Centers are meant to provide a structure in which school district officials and teachers can work together in a way that has not occurred in the past. (While higher education involvement is required, this is little more than tokenism.) The mechanism for achieving this "working together," with more teacher influence than has been traditional, is the Teacher Center Policy Board. The principle that underlies the Teacher Center Policy Board is one of structured communication among constituencies--referred to at various times as "collaboration," "shared governance," "consortium," and even "parity." The terms are not really important, as they have never been worked through to the point where they have clear and different meanings. What is important is the idea that all those who have a vested interest in a program should have influence in the governance of the program. This idea is buttressed by formalized procedures for ensuring the elicitation and integration of input from

various constituent groups. "Collaboration" will be used (because currently it seems most popular) to refer to this concept which is very broad, but which typically is very specifically defined in any given situation. Collaboration is required by Teacher Centers regulations. It is likely that the potential for Teacher Centers is inextricably attached to the ability of education professionals with differing orientations to make sense from the idea. As in nearly all federally sponsored programs in education, the question boils down to-- Can field practitioners work within the context of federal regulations, and utilize the resources to develop high quality programs?

Because a "symposium" has been defined as a gathering at which there is a free exchange of ideas, the attempt in the remainder of this paper will be to push forward with either new or previously unspoken ideas that challenge the concept of collaboration. Rather than reiterating the views that are currently prevailing in the literature, assertions will be made that seriously question many of the popular beliefs about collaboration.¹ This approach is taken in the spirit of "getting some things out on the table." It is also done with the full understanding that some may jump to the conclusion that the writer has "left the fold." Hopefully this will not occur; rather, the assertions which follow are intended to challenge a sacred cow, and to inspire a new "exchange of ideas" that will lead to a better understanding of collaboration.

SOME UNCOMFORTABLE ASSERTIONS

An assertion is a statement or declaration frequently made without benefit of supporting evidence, and is by its very nature speculative.

Nicholson and Joyce have pointed out that the literature abounds with positive assertions about collaboration; they also point out that these assertions--which tend to portray collaboration as morally good, programmatically productive, and destined only to make things better--are made with little supporting evidence.² The time has arrived to explore the less supportive side of the issue.

The following assertions are made with the full understanding that they are debatable. They are not made, however, without support. Support in this instance is based on rational and logical analysis, as well as on experience and observation. The purpose of the following assertions is to provide the opportunity for educators to encounter and to think about aspects of collaboration that may be uncomfortable and may be topics of discussion that, as a profession, we tend to repress.

Assertion #1--Collaboration in teacher education is becoming an end unto itself, and is not a means for improving programs. Collaboration should be a mechanism for improving teacher education programs. However, the focus of many collaborative structures has been on the process of collaboration, with little or no attention paid to the relationship of the activity to programs that emerge. One could go so far as to say that many collaborative units are striving not to become dysfunctional, rather than attempting to become facilitating and supportive of program development.

The Teacher Centers Program regulations may be a case in point of why this occurs. These regulations devote a great amount of space to detailing a collaborative governance structure. Definitions are care-

fully articulated, proportions of representation are precisely specified, and a detailed role of "supervision" is provided so everyone can be aware of the power and influence of the Policy Board. Amazingly, an almost absolute and blind faith is placed on the efficacy of this structure. In fact, not a single statement is made in the regulations concerning the implicit intended relationship of program quality to the collaborative structure. For example, no criteria are specified or even suggested for the selection of personnel to perform the teacher education tasks. In the final analysis, the quality of the proposed teacher education program is not addressed by the regulations, and therefore is an exclusive function of the potential efficacy of the Policy Board. In fact, program development appears to be a minor concern, if it is a concern at all. The question of whether or not this total commitment to and faith in a collaborative structure is justified cannot be answered at this time. It should, however, be questioned.

It would seem logical to assume that one purpose of a collaborative process in teacher education is for a small group of people to represent the sentiment of various constituent groups. Thus, one could rightfully expect to find a variety of different linkages between a collaborative governance structure and those who are being "represented." Rarely, however, are those linkages found. Rather, "collaborators" have a tendency to become enmeshed in developing a system for working together, and often lose sight of the responsibility to their constituents. This can result in a curious situation where program developers, those who are supposedly responsive to the collaborative group, are in fact more directly in touch with the constituents than are the representa-

tives who serve in the collaborative group.

It would appear that in order to break this "internalism of collaboration" in teacher education, the structure must be initially conceived and constructed with a variety of linkages that facilitate a representative having access to a constituent group. It probably will not happen informally, and it probably cannot happen if members of collaborative groups do not devote a great deal of time and effort to the process. There is little reason to believe that a collaborative group which meets once per month for three hours and does little or nothing in between can adequately represent any constituency. There is no reason to believe that this process will achieve the promise of collaboration, i.e., improved programs.

Assertion #2--Collaborative structures in teacher education tend to disrupt existing governance mechanisms, thus either impeding or isolating program development. Every school district and teacher training institution has an established set of governance structures designed to make decisions about, and to facilitate the development of educational programs. Most non-traditional governance structures, because they are supported by external funds, are conceived and operationalized without regard to these existing structures. For example, most school districts have curriculum committees, inservice committees, research approval committees, and the like, while teacher education institutions have course approval committees, school liaison committees and others. Although these structures are far from standardized across the country, one would be hard pressed to find either a school district or a teacher training institution without them.

Because collaborative structures in teacher education are usually externally supported (it is difficult to find many teacher education collaborative structures that do not have external financial support), the tendency is to become isolated rather than integrated into the traditional governance mechanisms of the involved institutions. When this occurs, of course, the power of the new governance structure is markedly inhibited, and usually limited to the influence of the financial resources they have at their disposal. This type of influence is, of course, usually transitory. If, in fact, the activities of the externally supported governance structure become threatening, they are usually stopped--though oftentimes not without some turmoil. If the activities are not threatening, the governance structure and the resulting programs are still typically isolated from the mainstream activities of the institution(s).

The federally supported Teacher Centers are again a case in point. The obvious intent of establishing Policy Boards to supervise Teacher Centers was to create a shift in the constituent group that has the major influence on inservice programs. In reality, the shift in influence can only occur with the permission of the institutions involved, and usually only through their existing governance mechanisms. Thus, collaborative governance structures such as Teacher Center Policy Boards are faced with a major dilemma--being co-opted by the existing governance structures and not achieving their goals or maintaining their autonomy but remaining isolated from the mainstream activities.

The obvious solution to this dilemma is to design new collaborative structures only within the context of those already in place,

and to operationalize these structures as part of the institutions in which they are located, e.g., could the Policy Board merge with the "in-service committee," and have the Director of Inservice Education serve as the Chair? Obviously, this would mean a great deal of variability from site to site, and would probably not be possible if a specific governance model were nationally prescribed.

Assertion #3--Collaboration in teacher education is not related to quality or improvement in program development. Actually, this should be considered the upbeat version of the assertion--the downbeat version would postulate a negative relationship between collaboration and quality or improvement in program development. Although this assertion is related to Assertion #1, there is a difference. Whereas Assertion #1 explores what is happening with collaborative structures, this assertion focuses on what is not happening. An exploration of some of the reasons for this phenomenon should make the assertion more understandable.

Webster suggests that collaboration can be defined as, "to work jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavor." The operative word in that definition is "intellectual."³ It would probably be permissible to substitute the word professional, and that would imply that those who work in collaborative structures must possess specific knowledge, understanding, experience, and/or expertise in the area that is the topic for collaboration. Succinctly, if one follows this definition to a logical conclusion, there would be some type of competence criteria established to guide the selection of members of a collaborative structure. Such, unfortunately, is not the case.

Typically, the criterion for selecting members of a governance structure is either a person's ascribed position or a position within

a political group--expertise in teacher education is serendipitous, if it is evident at all. Members of collaborative groups that come from ascribed positions (e.g., central administration, building level administration, University administration) usually possess expertise in the field that relates to their position, and not to the teacher education activity that is the topic of interest. Members that are placed on governance structures from political organizations are usually either elected, or appointed by those who are elected. Typically, and legitimately, these members are charged with the responsibility of representing their group. Again, knowledge and expertise in teacher education is not essential. When these conditions exist, there is a strong possibility that the quality of program decisions will suffer.

Teacher Centers is, again, a case in point. The regulations describe very specifically the role groups to be represented on Policy Boards, and in the case of teachers, the manner in which they are to be selected. There is not a single statement or suggestion about the expertise or competence that Policy Board members should bring to their position. Therefore, there is no logical reason to expect that a legislated mix of constituents on a Policy Board will possess any particular strengths in making programmatically wise policy in teacher education. This is not necessarily because the membership of the governance structure doesn't want to be helpful, they simply may not possess the necessary skills.

Assuming that quality of program and selection of staff are related, there is still more reason to believe that the assertion is true. If the governance structure has the authority to select professional

staff, this leads logically to the assumption that the selection of staff will be political in nature, and the search will focus on an applicant's belief or value system, and/or ideology. An applicant's membership in a constituent group might also serve as a selection criterion. The important point is that demonstrated competence and expertise in the field of teacher education is likely to be of secondary importance. Furthermore, even if professional competence were highlighted as a selection criterion, there must be some question as to the ability of the politically constituted governance structure to select wisely.

The solution to the problem implied in this assertion is deceptively obvious, yet amazingly complicated. Professional criteria rather than political and ascribed position criteria should predominate in the selection of members on a collaborative governance board in teacher education. These criteria could be established by using a political process, and could even be implemented in conjunction with political or ascribed position criteria. They should, however, predominate, and applicants for governance group positions who do not possess acceptable professional characteristics should be eliminated from further consideration.

Assertion #4--Collaboration operates against competent program developers functioning freely and exhibiting sensitivity to their clients. One of the reasons this may occur is that those involved in a collaborative activity nearly always have full time positions that consume the bulk of their time and effort. Thus, "collaboration" rarely occurs either with great frequency or for a long duration. Thus, those involved simply can't be on top of all that is happening in a

program. Because of this, it is not uncommon for program developers to have to "wait for the next meeting" in order to get approval to move in a specific program direction.

When those involved in a collaborative effort, and charged with the responsibility for representing a constituent group are not fully aware of all aspects of program needs, the tendency is to think and make decisions based on one's personal orientation and view of the profession. For example, a teacher representative might react negatively to a proposed summer program because he or she preferred to spend their summers doing something else. At times like this, it is difficult to convince people that someone other than themselves may have a better grasp of the situation and of the most desirable way to develop that program.

In fact, another, more difficult to understand phenomenon may occur. Any person responsible for representing a constituent group who does not have time to gather all of the information from constituents that should be gathered, may, in fact, feel some guilt about having to make decisions that affect program development personnel who have more and better information. This subtle form of guilt is sometimes translated into negativism. When this occurs, it is frustrating not only to the governance structure member, but also to program development personnel.

It would seem that at the very best, collaborative governance structures have the potential to slow down program development and to reduce the ability of a program developer to react spontaneously and quickly to field-derived needs. At its worst, program development can be almost totally handicapped. The solution to the problem suggested

by this assertion is embedded in the final assertion.

Assertion #5--Unless collaborative governance structures in teacher education operate as support systems for competent program developers, the process will lower rather than raise the quality of programs.

It can be argued that collaborative structures in teacher education are evolving as adversarial bodies rather than as guidance and support systems. This has probably occurred because of the criteria for membership on collaborative boards that were discussed earlier. Unfortunately, program development in teacher education often suffers because it is caught in non-related political and personal battles between constituent groups as well as between individuals on governance boards. It is not unusual to see program development personnel operate to keep information from collaborative groups in an effort to avoid irrelevant confrontation.

Two possible solutions to this situation emerge--one clearly more feasible than the other. Probably less feasible is the idea that collaborative groups can be structured exclusively as advisory groups designed to provide a structured forum for feedback and guidance to program developers. Obviously, this type of structure flies in the face of the "zeitgeist" in collaborative governance in teacher education. A more plausible solution would suggest that the logical line of communication between a teacher education collaborative structure and the program developers would be through the institutions that house the program. If it could be recognized that program personnel work "for" an institution and "with" a collaborative group, then the relationship between the members of the governance board and the program developers

could focus on issues of substance. High level institutional leaders could then serve as mediators in the solution of political and personal problems. This idea is not as far fetched as it may sound. One need only recognize and accept the fact that school superintendents and deans of education, for example, possess an ultimate authority for programs that operate within their institutions. If these institutional leaders can accept a well structured role definition for a collaborative board, one that provides a great deal of programmatic freedom, then it would be much easier to acknowledge their hierarchical position, and to allow them to serve as official mediators in times of stress.

IN SUMMARY

It is recognized that the assertions presented in this brief paper are speculative and open to debate--in fact should be debated. It is also recognized that they bring to the fore topics that are typically not spoken about and are likely to create discomfort for us as a profession. Yet, they are topics that deserve to be recognized and discussed if teacher education is to utilize collaborative groups as a tool for improving the quality of programs.

The intent of this paper has not been to attempt to nail the coffin closed on collaboration--that would be inappropriate because collaboration is here, and it is likely to remain. Rather, the intent has been to challenge the profession of teacher education to explore all aspects of collaboration and to attempt to recognize problems that may exist. Problems cannot be solved until they are understood, and

it is in the solution of the problems associated with collaboration
that innovative and superior programs can develop.

Footnotes

¹See:

Nicholson, Alexander M., and Bruce R. Joyce, ISTE Report III: Literature. Palo Alto: Stanford Center for Research and Development on Teaching, 1976, pp. 33-56.

Edelfelt, Roy A., and Margo Johnson, Rethinking Inservice Education. Washington, D. C.: National Education Association, 1975.

Hansen, John H., ed., Governance By Consortium. Tallahassee: National Consortium of Competency-Based Education Centers, 1974.

²Nicholson and Joyce, op. cit., p. 33.

³Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1971, p. 162.